

FLO OY WONG

吳宇森

Cover: Chinese calligraphy of “Gee Ling Oy,”
the artist’s name

Edited by Moira Roth and Diane Tani.

Catalogue designed by Diane Tani.

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Kaleidoscope:
Ink Paintings and Drawings
by Flo Oy Wong
at the Antonio Prieto Gallery
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Kaleidoscope:

An Exhibition of
Ink Paintings and Drawings
by Flo Oy Wong

Antonio Prieto Gallery
Mills College

Visibility Press



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PREFACE

A year ago we created Visibility Press. In the summer of 1991, we had talked about doing some sort of project together, and then, in response to hearing of Bernice Bing's one-person exhibition at San Francisco's South of Market Gallery, we decided to publish a catalogue on her. Clearly she deserved one, and, equally clearly, the gallery had no funding. So our modest "press" was born which consisted of a Macintosh computer and a Pagemaker program. We created a catalogue on Bing with what is now our format—an essay, interview and narrative chronology, together with illustrations—in an edition of 100. We followed this by catalogues on Betty Kano and Brian Tripp to accompany their two-person exhibition at the Berkeley Store Gallery. (This time, we printed 200 copies each.) The present publication on Flo Oy Wong is our fourth.

We see these small-editioned catalogues—which we plan to produce sporadically when the spirit so moves us—as our personal response to a need for publications on important Bay Area artists who have little of substance written on them. We hope, too, that the series may function as a model to others of what is possible in the way of such desktop publications fueled with much passion and hard work but little in the way of financial resources.

This catalogue has been put together quickly. Katherine Crum, the director of the Mills Art Gallery, visited Flo Oy Wong's Sunnyvale studio towards the end of July of this year, and was so inspired by the work she saw there that she decided to offer Wong an exhibition in the early

fall. During August we worked closely with Wong on both the catalogue's content and format—several long days of talking, audio-taping and transcribing—and created the catalogue by early September. In addition to our two essays, the interview with Wong and the narrative chronology, we asked two of Wong's siblings, William and Nellie, to contribute. Nellie Wong generously gave us permission to reprint "It's in the Blood," a poem about the Wong family. William Wong has written a series of articles for the *Oakland Tribune* on Oakland Chinatown and his family life. We have reprinted two of these (with permission of the *Oakland Tribune*): "A Place for Oakland Chinatown at Last?" (1988) and "My Family Still Celebrates Chinese New Year" (1981).

We are deeply grateful to Katherine Crum for all her encouragement and support; to Erin Tougher, a gallery intern from the Museum Studies Program at San Francisco State University who helped to organize the exhibition; and to Tim Mosman for his meticulous contributions. We want to thank Lucy R. Lippard and Hung Liu for their introductions; Mary-Ann Lutzker for her good editorialeye; Denise L. Beirnes for her assistance in proofreading; Valerie Guth for her miraculous appearance as an invaluable editor in the last stages of the catalogue's production; Ed Wong for computer expertise and his indispensable help; and Felicia Wong for her advice. Most of all, we would like to thank Flo Oy Wong, our close friend as well as an artist whom we greatly admire. She has devoted endless hours collaboratively with us to create this catalogue.

Moira Roth and Diane Tani, September 1992



Wiping the Table, 1984
18 1/2" x 15"
graphite drawing on paper
from the *Oakland Chinatown Series*
Photo by Curtis Fukuda

INTRODUCTION I: RICE SACK AND OTHER STORIES

There is a rice sack on my kitchen wall. I believe it is inspired by Flo Wong's remarkable rice sack installation called *Eye of the Rice* that I saw recently at the Capp Street Project/AVT in San Francisco. As Chinese, we learn from an early age how important the rice bowl is in our lives. It symbolizes the fundamental necessities in life: responsibility among family members, the struggle for survival and the measurement of prosperity. Flo Wong's giant rice-sack collage is for me a kind of quilt which tells stories of Chineseness through the eyes of an "American female of Asian descent," as Wong wrote in one of her essays, "There's More to Being Chinese Than Chop Suey."

I admire Flo Wong's courage in telling her stories. Rather than waiting for multiculturalism to become fashionable, she just started doing her work, picking up the "art-making" vocabulary along the way. Whether "crying" with paint on paper during the Tiananmen Square massacre, drawing as the reclamation of family memory in Oakland's Chinatown, or piling up bitter melons and funerary money in an act of mourning over hate crimes, Flo Wong is a story teller who is revealing something about her life, her people and about us.

Hung Liu
September 5, 1992
Mills College, Oakland

INTRODUCTION II

When I saw (slides of) Flo Oy Wong's work a few years ago, I was particularly struck by *Eye of the Rice*. Somehow it was clear that this was not just an "ethnic gimmick," but a meaningful symbol, an empty and full container of life or lives. Now for the first time I hear the story from which the piece is woven: the artist's father is shot and her mother runs after the assailant and catches him in the street; for a time the family's rice sacks are empty, filled by the kindness of neighbors and relatives.

This tale, says Wong, became a mantra for survival. Her collage incorporates the elements of her own survival as an Asian American confronting anti-Asian racism by other Americans. *Eye of the Rice* is also a homage to her parents, whose children have not only survived but made distinct marks on American culture: "I hear my heart beat through rice sacks that were carried to my family long ago." As I read Flo Wong's writings and Moira Roth's perceptive meanderings through the labyrinths of all our lives, I hear the whispers in the background, the swelling chorus of all those untold stories beginning to be told.

Lucy R. Lippard
August 3, 1992
Georgetown, Maine

It is impossible to think about the Wong family without considering the history of Chinese immigrants on the West Coast. In 1848, some 20,000 Chinese took part in the Gold Rush; by the 1860s, Chinese laborers played a key role in the creation of the transcontinental railway. Their bitterly ironic “reward” for such energy and contributions to nineteenth-century American history was the anti-Chinese Movement. Beginning around 1870, repeated episodes of racial violence made life painful for Chinese immigrants in their new homeland. Their rights were blocked, too, by one law after another; these included laws directed specifically against the Chinese, as well as more general racist laws. (Only in 1948, for example, was the law against intermarriage officially repealed in California.) In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act banned Chinese labor and denied Chinese the right to become naturalized citizens. Systematic legal attacks widened to include more and more Asian immigrants culminating in the 1924 Immigration Quota Law, which forbade all aliens ineligible for citizenship to enter the United States. This applied to virtually all Asians except those from Hawaii and the Philippines, countries that had been recently annexed by the U.S., and whose inhabitants, therefore, were American citizens.

Such laws were not abstractions, but directly affected Wong’s family. In an unpublished 1990 autobiographical essay, “Phoenix Birthing: Who is ‘Gee Ling Oy?’” (Gee Ling Oy is Wong’s Chinese name), she wrote of her family’s “secret.” *Because of restrictive immigration laws, she [Wong’s mother] arrived in America as my father’s sister,*

and was married "in paper only" to a man named Sheng Wong, a secret father we never knew or saw. Our other family secret was that our real father, Seow Hong Gee, then became a publicly fictitious uncle to our family when we interacted outside Chinatown.

The Gee family ran the Great China Restaurant, located at 723 Webster Street in Oakland's Chinatown. Wong remembers her parents putting in fifteen-hour working days, and that she, like her siblings, began to help out at the restaurant at an early age. Flo was the youngest of six girls (Li Hong, Li Keng and Lai Wah had been born in China, the others in Oakland); one of whom became the well-known poet, Nellie Wong. The only brother, William, now a prominent journalist with a regular column in the *Oakland Tribune*, was the youngest child in this creative household.

In 1939, when Wong was a year old, her father was attacked by a cousin and the shooting was reported in all the local papers. The relative had been sent by Seow Hong Gee's business partners, whose lottery funds he had embezzled in a desperate desire to support his family. Wong's mother ran boldly after the assassin and caught him; and while the father slowly recovered, relatives supported the family by giving them sacks of rice. This became a much-repeated story told by Wong's mother to her family.

In 1977 Nellie Wong, who was five years old at the time of the shooting, described the episode in her poem, "From a Heart of Rice Straw," which she addressed to her mother.

*I expected you to fly into the clouds, wail
at Papa's side, but you chased cousin instead.
Like the cops and robbers on the afternoon radio.
It didn't matter that Papa lay bleeding.
It didn't matter that cousin accused Papa
of cheating him. You ran, kicking
your silk slippers on the street, chasing
cousin until you caught him, gun still in hand.
My sister and I followed you, crying.²*

It is this immigrant childhood and complex family history that Wong in 1983 began to image as an artist. At age 45, she started her *Oakland Chinatown Series*, an ambitious ongoing work which now numbers thirty-five pieces. Wong at first worked in graphite; and then, in 1990, she began to add fragments of rice sacks and paint. These early small graphitedrawings depict people and places from her childhood world. There are three generations of Gee family members, together with the family restaurant workers. We see ordinary restaurant life together with family events such as weddings, outings and birthdays. *Oakland Chinatown Series* was to be the second in five series; the first was *Rice Sack Series* (1978-). These two with the remaining three—*T'ian'anmen Series* (1989), *Visibility Series* (1990) and *Circle Series* (1991)—make up the body of Wong's mature work over the last decade. The Mills exhibition consists of works selected from three of the series: *Oakland Chinatown Series*, *T'ian'anmen Series* and *Circle Series*.

Among the thirteen *Oakland Chinatown Series* drawings selected for this exhibition, eight depict scenes in the restaurant, the locus of not only the family's work but also much of its social life. We see Wong's parents, their children Li Hong, Bill, Nell, Les and Flo, and grandchildren, Vickie, Melvin and Julie, together with Henry and Richard, two brothers-in-law. One drawing depicts an employee and extended family member (Lo Wong Bok) as he washes dishes, and we see the family enjoying a more private moment at a meal in *Upstairs*.

Five years before she began these drawings, Wong had already delved into her ethnic background as a subject of her art (something she had once been cautioned against in an art class). *Rice Sack Series*, another large ongoing project, began in 1978. Eating rice—as a child as well as an adult—and the symbolic import of rice in Chinese culture and mythology both play a role in Wong's fascination with rice and rice sacks. She began taking commercial Asian rice sacks manufactured in America, which she had collected for years, sewing them together, and festooning them with objects. In 1986, she started on *Eye of the Rice* and the work grew in complexity as well as scale as she began to embroider shapes (circles, spirals, stars, star tendrils) and use a wide range of colored threads, sequins and *lee see* (a children's Chinese New Year bag for money). Often she highlighted the lettering of the rice sacks so that, for example, "pa" (out of a "patna" rice label) would appear as a tribute to her father, and "ma" (from a "mahatma" rice label) as a tribute to her mother. In 1989, she made the first of her two sequined, rice-sack-covered chairs. *At first, I was distanced from the intense personal sense of the piece, not ready to acknowledge the healing I was intuitively working toward, and maintained that I was only making*

visible Asian American pride. As a cross reference, I thought of Van Gogh and his paintings of potato eaters for I, too, understood the place of life-surviving staples in the lives of the working class.

Earlier this year, Wong and Hilda Shum were given a two-person exhibition, "deFORMATION / transFORMATION," at San Francisco's Capp Street Project/AVT. While she worked on the components of this installation in her Sunnyvale studio, Wong slowly and painfully began to confront the impact on her of the traumatic episode of her father's shooting. The installation was about this, and she titled it *Eye of the Rice: Yu Mai Gee Fon*, which translated from Cantonese means "there's raw rice to cook dinner," a play on the lament of her mother at the time of the shooting that there was "no raw rice to cook dinner." Greatly influencing Wong were conversations with family members, especially with Li Keng, her older sister, who had just written a yet-unpublished autobiography. Wong invited Li Keng and her sister Nellie to the studio. As we three sisters, along with Li Keng's husband, my brother-in-law, Roger, stared at the piece, I knew that the healing was in progress.

The physically and thematically layered installation consisted of a rice-sack-covered chair, a massive fourteen by seventeen foot hanging made of rice sacks on one wall; on another wall rice-filled sacks are displayed and bowls, chopsticks and spoons are laid out on the floor. It is a difficult work to "read" (even with the information Wong has supplied) with its fragments of handwritten Chinese and English texts, its embroidered shapes, its symbolic colors and numerical references, and its objects which included a gold pocket watch. (Wong's father had worn one which had impeded the bullet, and thus

saved his life.) I finally understood. Eye of the Rice: Yu Mai Gee Fon is a physical testament to my survival of my father's shooting. Some fifty years later, I hand-stitched this cloth collage of rice sacks and sequins, using Chinese and English texts, to articulate the pain that surrounded us, eventually allowing me to deal with my parents' incredible courage and bravery.

This dramatic episode was unusual in the family's history. The images in the *Oakland Chinatown Series*, based on old family photographs taken by Wong herself as a child and by an older relative, represent the more typical everyday family tempo of existence. The drawings belong both to the tradition of genre art in painting and to that of the amateur family photo album. On one level they reflect their origins in snapshots of the 1940s and 1950s with the slightly stilted period poses of the members of the family and restaurant workers. From the beginning, Wong sensed that the work operated on several levels. As she wrote in 1989: *they record one segment of the heartbeat of Chinese American life here in the United States. The drawings act, too, of course, as artistic memory records of a particular childhood, and they further provided a stimulus for the artist's psychological and cultural reflections.*

The photographs, and Wong's reworking of the images in her studio, provoked not only visual memories but emotional ones, and inspired her to begin to analyze her childhood more carefully. How and why had the girls in the family been treated so radically different from the brother, and how had these childhood experiences encouraged her, almost perversely against such odds, to become an artist?

Raised as a compliant offspring in our traditional transplanted household in America, I lacked a sense of self. The strong sense of "others" in our life, influenced by the Confucius ethic of societal structure and order in China, dominated the infrastructure of my family. That "other-directedness" was reinforced by the undervaluing of females in tradition-laden Chinese families. Our unit was one of those families, and, as such, my sisters and I as daughters did not count because we would not perpetuate the family name. In recognition of this biased reality, I tacitly accepted this specific family structure unaware of options available to me. Lacking a sense of self, I have struggled throughout my life as daughter, wife and mother to create a path to me. When my children were still young, I took the first step on that path when I became an artist. For me to be an artist from a traditional transplanted Asian culture—which did not support self expression and which denied the value of females—is self enlightening.

Wong appears in three of the exhibition's drawings. (There are some six more pieces in the series which portray her as well). In *Standing on Webster Street*, she is outside the restaurant, posing in an apron, hands thrust into her pockets, beside her brother-in-law's 1938 Plymouth. In another, *Wiping the Table*, she looks out at us, but this time the apron protects an expensive Lanz dress which was "the high school rage for girls at that time and my pride and joy." For the third drawing, *Mom, Pop & Me*, Wong used three separate photographs as she could find none depicting herself alone with her parents. Perhaps the most overtly psychologically revealing drawing is *Lying Down* (1987), where the adolescent Flo lies sprawled on a couch. *I still recall the conscious frame of mind in which I started this art piece. In a state of discontent and moodiness, I wanted to know what was bothering me. Why was I so unhappy? I found this particular*



Say, 1989
53" x 34"
ink painting on paper
from the *T'ian'anmen Series*
Photo by Curtis Fukuda

picture challenging. In 1989, Wong introduced the image of the phoenix into the *Oakland Chinatown Series* as a feminist metaphor. In *Phoenix Touches Self*, we see Wong as a child outside her parent's Oakland house, her body lightly touched by the phoenix's feathers. Earlier she had chosen the Chinese New Year lion-dragon as her personal symbol, however, as she became increasingly immersed in feminism, *I explored the phoenix, discarding the dragon in favor of the mythical bird which represents the Chinese empress of long ago. I used the phoenix because conceptually it rose from the ashes. For me, rising from the ashes is a distinctly female survival experience. I know because I constantly rise from the emotional ashes of my past.*

In 1989, Wong was in her studio experimenting with the new symbol of the phoenix, and the first sequined, leesee, rice-sacked chair. Then, on June 4th, 1989, she, like so many others around the world, heard of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing.

Wong was devastated. Painful image upon image appeared on American television and in the newspapers—the killings, marching relentless troops, the man who temporarily halted the tanks, the crushed bicycles of the revolutionary students. News came through fax machines, and firsthand accounts of people who had escaped. Hung Liu, the Beijing artist currently Oakland-based and a close friend of Wong's, began to work feverishly in her studio responding to the events, creating a Chinese Pieta—a woman stoically seated with exposed bound feet—and an installation of crushed bicycles.

Wong, too, shortly after the massacre headed for her studio to start her T'ian'anmen Series. In quick succession, she produced the Series' seven paintings using symbolic colors of red, gold, yellow, turquoise and blue ink, applied with Chinese brushes. Chinese ideograms are a focus of the images. The works have such titles as *Square Gone Haywire* and *Blood People: Sticking the Neck Out*. Other titles are in Cantonese: *Say*, which means "death," and *Moon*, "gates or doors," referring to Tiananmen Square which in Chinese is called the "Gate to Heavenly Happiness."

At the same time, Wong wrote a series of anguished, harsh bilingual poems. (Each succeeding year she has written additional poems on the anniversary of the event.) One poem, *Mock Ser Loong*, accompanied the painting of that name. In Chinese, *mock ser loong* means "an ink-painted dragon" and refers to the dragon as a metaphor for China itself.

Mock Ser Loong
Loong gnan hom
Gnan ler cheong
Hoong heurt low
Hoon tin gwong.

The ink painted dragon
Dragon eye weeps
Tear drop is long
Red blood flows
Red sky glows.

August 2, Georgetown

In this wooden house, with its books, sunlight and photos of the Lippard family, and the view from the deck of the land and water used by its various Indian and European inhabitants, I sit thinking of the first meeting between Wong and myself, and of our close personal friendship as well as of shared activist concerns. And—as Lippard and I have been talking intensely for several days—I have Lippard's voice and ideas in my musings, too. Last time I visited Lippard in Georgetown, she was completing the manuscript of her 1990 book, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America*. Now I have decided to spend the rest of the day rereading the book in order to think of Wong in this larger context of revisionist American art history.

In the introduction to *Mixed Blessings*, Lippard describes the book's thematic structure: "The first chapter is 'Naming.' It is about self-naming and being labeled, about coming to terms with self-representation, despite the shape-shifting identities most of us are forced to assume. The next chapter is 'Telling,' about history, family, religion and storytelling. It looks back to where the intercultural process began and weighs the burdens of the past on the present. 'Landing' is about roots and points of departure, about taking place and being displaced. The fourth chapter, 'Mixing,' is about mestizaje, or miscegenation—the double-edged past of rape and colonization, the double-edged future of a new and freely mixed world. The last chapter is 'Turning Around,' about subversion and trickery, the uses of humor and irony by which a subjugated people survive. The brief postface is 'Dreaming,' proof that the subject has no conclusion."³

Namings
Tellings
Landings
Mixings
Turning Arounds
Dreamings

These titles seem apt ways to describe the concerns and passions which have preoccupied Wong for years—both in her studio and out in the world.

I first met Flo Wong in February of 1989 in the formal setting of San Francisco's Hilton Hotel, where she attended a panel I was moderating on Pat Ferrero's *Hearts and Hands*, a discussion of nineteenth-century American women's quilts and their relationship to politics and activism as well as beauty and utility. I was soon to discover that Wong was in her element in such an ambiance, that she thrived on such interplays of art, feminism and collective action. My memories of Wong from that first meeting are of a woman passionate and intense, curious and wide-ranging in her interests, yet shrewdly pragmatic as to what was feasible. In other words, a sensible dreamer.

After this Women's Caucus for Art meeting, Wong began to research the possibility of establishing a network to collect slides of Asian American women artists. She contacted Betty Kano, another artist-activist, and in the late spring of 1989, I was invited to attend a modest meeting at Kano's house in Berkeley to see the slides they had assembled. Soon afterwards, we met again at the Oakland studio of Kyenum Kum, a Korean American painter. Out of these two meetings evolved the notion of the Asian American Women Artists Association

(AAWAA), a group with goals far larger than merely the creation of a temporary structure through which to accumulate slides. (In 1992, this lively group has over eighty members.) For Wong, the organization has provided an important base for herself as an artist, as well as a structure in which her leadership skills have been beneficial to other artists.

At the second meeting, some dozen women arrived. Hour after hour we sat spellbound around Kum's food-laden kitchen table talking intimately, often loudly, about our lives, art, culture, exile, immigration, love, marriage, family, ambition, art school, exhibition strategies, language, memory and age. Perhaps, most of all we returned, over and over again, to choices and limitations which confront Asian American women in their lives and art. We were hesitant to leave the table, even to view slides, and the planned presentation only began very late that evening.

The meeting at Kum's was an extraordinarily exciting one. What I was most struck by, in these and subsequent meetings of the growing group of Asian American women (I am the only regular non-Asian member of the group, and also the only art historian), was the endless differences between the women. The range included not only the obvious differences of diverse cultural-ethnic backgrounds, but differences, for example, between a recent first generation immigrant and a third generation American, and differences of age and class as well as individual temperaments. The art seemed as diverse as the women, pointing out the difficulties in pinpointing shared sensibilities, something that might be characterized as "an Asian American women artist's sensibility." The question continues to challenge Wong and others.⁴

In 1989-1990, Wong was hard at work on strengthening and widening the activities and connections of the Asian American Women Artists Association. (In 1990 in New York, Godzilla, an action-oriented, Asian American art network was formed by a group of artists, male as well as female.) Another activity consuming a great deal of Wong's energy during this time was her role as project director for a landmark exhibition in San Francisco. This exhibition, titled "Completing the Circle: Six Artists," of a group of Northern California Chinese Americans, was an extraordinary feat of conception and execution. Concurrently, as Wong worked within Asian American circles, she became an increasingly vocal and demanding presence as a spokeswoman for Asian Americans in feminist circles. In 1991 she was appointed to the National Board of Directors of the Women's Caucus for Art, and has been highly active in its national and local activities and politics.

August 4, Georgetown

Wong has titled her Mills exhibition "Kaleidoscope." Looking through Lippard's books in Maine, I find a dictionary and read the entry which describes Sir David Brewster's 1817 invention of the kaleidoscope tube and the positioning of its colored glasses and angle-reflecting surfaces to create "constantly changing bright figures."

Another volume on the shelf (something Lippard found recently in a second-hand bookstore) is a stained green-and-gold-covered 1890 book, *The Marvels of the New West*. Chinese are nowhere to be found in this volume except for a brief mention of "gangs" of Chinese workers on the railways. William M. Thayer, the author of the book, attacks "the prediction that the unprecedented mixture

of nationalities in the New West will compromise, and possibly destroy its noblest institutions." "No," he adamantly asserts , "this will not be fulfilled, since the manifest drift of affairs is to the absorption of all other races by the Anglo Saxons who now control the destiny of the human family." The author also dismisses the notion that in the future there will be a medley of languages in this country: "We shall have but one tongue spoken from the Atlantic to the Pacific." This was written in 1890 a few years after the Chinese Exclusion Act.

If the author of this 1890 racist text had been able to be present, he would have been shocked to witness Flo Oy Wong's activities in this "New West" a hundred years later. In San Francisco in 1990, Flo Oy Wong found herself at the front line of battles over funding to achieve not only the "Completing the Circle" exhibition but also its bilingual Chinese-American catalogue. It was part of the Festival 2000, an ambitious multicultural event in the city which ran into funding problems early on. Wong is a good fighter and threats that funding would be withdrawn roused her, indeed outraged her, to fearless protest. During this time we kept in close touch, and I would admiringly watch her move with ease from this role of community organizer, skilled and demanding in tough negotiations, to devoted immersion in her art.

Activism and art play off one another in the creative process of Flo Oy Wong. Her involvement with "Completing the Circle" took her back to her Sunnyvale studio where she began to work in 1991 on the Circle Series, the third body of works in this Mills exhibition. Here again, as in the *T'ian'anmen Series*, she used Chinese brushes and this time also Chinese inks. *The first paintings represented my feelings of inclusion as a Chinese American*

within a wider American system. As the Circle Series developed, I studied Native American Cherokee tsalagi philosophy, learning some of their ways as people of color to forgive. I then combined, within the circle format, my subjective understanding of Chinese American and Native American concepts. Finally, the paintings then coalesced to symbolize separateness/togetherness, female/male, inclusion/exclusion to forge a meaning of life itself.

This is ambitious dreaming, but Wong is an ambitious dreamer. As she once wrote about another of her series, she wants not only to contend with but to challenge her experience of being invisible in this country. *Feeling marginal my entire life, I began in 1990 to visually articulate my feelings about being an American female of Asian descent. Articulating these feelings through art, I have begun the Visibility Series.*

Flo Oy Wong is not only an ambitious dreamer, but she is also becoming a highly visible one, locally and nationally, in contemporary American art.

Footnotes

I drafted this essay (which is intended as a general study of Wong rather than one which focuses exclusively on the works in the exhibition) while I was in Maine, and later edited it in Berkeley. I am deeply grateful for critical readings of the text by Whitney Chadwick, and by Mary-Ann Lutzker, Katherine Crum, Diane Tani, Flo Oy Wong and Valerie Guth.

¹ I have drawn all the statements by Wong in my essay from various audio and video interviews, and texts by her. (See listing of these sources at the beginning of the catalogue's chronology.) She and I agreed that it would not be necessary to cite the wide range of individual unpublished manuscript sources, of which she generously provided copies for me. I recommend to those interested in further reading on Wong her excellent published text: "There's More to Being Chinese in America Than Chop Suey: Narrative Drawings as Criticism in Oakland Chinatown," in *Pluralistic Approaches to Art Criticism*, edited by Kristin G. Congdon and Doug Blandy, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1992.

² Nellie Wong, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park*, Kelsey St. Press, Berkeley, California, 1977, pp. 40-41.

³ Concerning the origins of the *Rice Sack Series*, one must also take into account the impact on Wong of her viewing of an installation containing rice sacks by Lee Tacang, a Pilipino artist, which she credits with giving her "permission" to use this material and symbol. (See account by Wong of this in the 1978 section of the catalogue's chronology.)

⁴ Lucy R. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1990, p. 3.

⁵ Currently Betty Kano and Elaine Kim, both San Francisco Bay Area-based, are currently undertaking research for their book, *Visions and Fierce Dreams: The Lives and Work of Asian American Artists*. In this first study of Asian American contemporary art, the authors are mulling over such issues as the possibility or not of developing classifications for different strains of Asian American art. In New York Margo Machida, the painter-activist-scholar, is preparing a major traveling 1994 exhibition on first generation immigrants for the Asian Society Gallery, "Mediated Images: Asian Identities in American Art," and she, too, is confronting similar theoretical questions.



Blood People:
Sticking the Neck Out, 1989
39 1/2" x 52 1/2"
ink painting on paper
from the *T'ian' ammen Series*
Photo by Curtis Fukuda

SHARPENING INTO FOCUS

Diane Tani

Without a doubt, writing fiction requires passion and compassion. A sense of urgency. Excitement. Intensity. Stillness. For many of us, writing is our reaction to injustices, absurdities, beauty. It's our way of registering our complaints or affirmations. The best are not didactic. They do not scream out "message," nor are they abstractions. Our stories are our personal response. What we want to specify. What we see. What we feel. Our wide angle lens—our close-up look. And even if the story doesn't quite pinpoint the solution or the answer, it is the exploration itself that is often worth the trip.

--Terry McMillan¹

To encounter Flo Oy Wong's work is to go on such a journey, to enter her home, to be introduced to her family and friends, her triumphs and tribulations.

I was introduced to Wong's *Oakland Chinatown Series* through "Her Story," an exhibition at the Oakland Museum. Arriving via public transportation, I walked through the grid of Oakland's Chinatown, which unintentionally became a preview to Wong's illumination of its history.

Upon viewing the series, I discovered my own family. I saw the same "new life" of the immigrants in my past. I saw the same stern determination to "make it" in Gold Mountain. I saw affirmation in a history hidden from

my American textbooks, yet told over and over again at family gatherings. I didn't see the cartoon character stereotypes which are so prevalent in media portrayals of Asian Americans. Rather, I saw reclamation. I saw and embraced this family, my family.

In the drawing, *Wedding: Li Hong & Henry*, Wong depicts an Asian American couple standing in front of a house—a common snapshot format. However, Li Hong is wearing a Chinese wedding dress and Henry is dressed in a three-piece suit. This coming together of Asian and American elements portray the assimilation / acculturation that occurred in Chinatown of that time. The picking of clothing mirrors the choosing of values and traditions.

In an Asian American Women Artists Association exhibition at the Community Arts Gallery, Wong showed a small painting, *The Lone Man Appeared* from the *T'ian'anmen Series*. It was a skinny horizontal piece, quirky in format but powerful in statement. This abstract painting on paper was a brightly colored geometric blur of shapes. With the aid of the title, the hint of reference, it all sharpened into focus. The work triggered my recollection of the Beijing events, my amazement at the unfolding tension and the shock of the final fatal action. The oblong format evoked a feeling of partial access to the scene; it simultaneously revealed and obscured. Because there was only a sliver, I felt like I was spying on the events as well as missing what would have been in the "other" portions. It was delicate and fragile, yet bold and striking.

In *Eye of the Rice: Yu Mai Gee Fon*, words such as "Rice," "AA," "Superior," "Longevity," "Extra Fancy," "Enriched," "China Farm," "U.S. No. 1" and "America's Finest" jump out from the canvas collage of rice sacks. Elements are highlighted by sequins, text and objects. The red-sequined paths lead the eye to encounter sayings, stories and trinkets—like a visual treasure hunt. Each component reveals another part of the story. *Eye of the Rice* is about the shooting of Wong's father by a cousin in Oakland Chinatown and her father's survival, about her mother's strength in chasing after the gunman, and the family's coping with the event.

When I look at this wall of history, of biography, I hear the whispers of immigrant America. I hear of the dignified struggles and also the ugly events hidden in its crevices. Wong has brought these stories to light, cleansed them of their shame and showered them with validations.

Flo Oy Wong's work presents an Asian American history, specific to her own, yet common to so many of us. She has a wonderful recollection of an admirer who recognized the location in Wong's *Wedding: Li Hong & Henry* by the stairs in the background of the image. It is into this collective recollection that Wong has tapped. Although deeply personal, her images speak of stories hidden in the walls of our narratives. By exposing her history, she extends her hand, inviting us to share our stories—past, present and future.

Footnotes

¹ Terry McMillan, "Introduction," *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*, Penguin Books, New York, New York, 1990, p. xxii.



Child of Mine, 1991
33 3/8" x 41 7/8"
ink painting on paper
from the *Circle Series*
Photo by Curtis Fukuda

INTERVIEW WITH THE ARTIST

Diane Tani, Berkeley, August 28, 1992

Diane Tani: *Tell me how you were inspired to create the Oakland Chinatown Series in 1983?*

Flo Oy Wong: I started the series when I didn't have money to hire nude models. I was anxious to continue drawing people so I searched for low cost ways to realize my goal. One day, as I flipped through an old family photo album, I started to draw. That first day I drew my mother and a relative from Canada standing on Webster Street. When I finished, I knew that I had begun something important. I framed it immediately; I had never done that before.

In this series, I was anxious to show our family as ordinary, working-class people in non-stereotypical ways. Tired of family politics, I didn't want to show the struggles that we knew in real life. I wanted some peace. I always had a question in my mind when I drew, and it was usually answered by the time I completed a drawing.

What attracted you to draw from your early photos?

A customer had given me a Brownie camera when I was about nine years old. So these photos were taken between the later 1940s through the 1950s. I would just press the button, and the photographs turned out rather decently. Henry, my brother-in-law, was responsible for the other photos. Never did I guess that later on I'd be drawing from them. I liked the immediacy of drawing, as there is nothing between me and the finished product.

I searched through the album for narratives of our family life. For *Standing on Webster Street*, I found a photograph of myself in a waitress uniform as I stood on the sidewalk in front of Henry's 1938 Plymouth. I still remember squinting in the sun that day.

I became curious about our workers, and selected the photo of our dishwasher for the drawing *Washing Dishes: Lo Wong Bok*. He and I worked as a team. He'd wash the silverware and I'd wipe. A quiet man, he talked only to call me to the kitchen, and I'd come running in order to carry a huge colander filled with wet silverware to the counter.

I drew *Mom, Pop & Me* from three separate photographs—my mother's immigration photo, my father's birthday picture and a school portrait of me where I'm probably about twelve years old. I was never alone with my parents; only years later through this 1984 drawing did I make a space for myself with them.

Bill in the Back Booth shows my brother being highly fashionable as he wears a Hawaiian shirt long before it was the rage. The back booth was a special place; it was the space closest to the kitchen, where we did our homework, wrapped wonton, ate our meals and chatted with our friends.

In *Wiping the Table*, I'm wearing a popular dress of the time, a Lanz design. I was influenced by my fellow students at Oakland High School. I wanted to belong and look like one of the girls, so I saved my tips to buy that dress.

Did you feel excluded at Oakland High?

Yes and no. There were enough Asian American students there and so I had a certain sense of belonging, particularly since I always assumed some leadership position in the general student body and wrote for the student newspaper. Yet, at that time, I was a "born again Christian," and I always carried a Bible which set me apart from the other kids.

Sitting in the Back Booth shows my sister, Li Hong, and my niece, Vickie, sitting with my brother, Bill. The shadows on the formica table are their reflections. Li Hong was married very early—her daughter, Vickie, is only four years younger than Bill—and it was a treat when they visited on Sundays from San Francisco.

I depicted the interior of the restaurant in *Great China: The Front Counter*. The man in the back is my brother-in-law, Richard, who's married to my husband's sister, Rachel. Henry, Li Hong's husband, is standing at the front counter. To his left there's a man wearing a hat. I drew this man as an Asian, although in the original photograph he's Caucasian, and I used a Cubistic approach to draw him.

I took Nellie's image from a larger family photograph to create *Nell at 13*. I included her bow which was such a part of her. When she saw it, she said, "Flo, I still can remember the bow." I really like that drawing because I didn't capture her realistically.

I often describe *The Back Booth*, a portrait of Bill, my parents and Vickie, in Americana terms. I call it the “Norman Rockwell” drawing of the *Oakland Chinatown Series*. My parents also reminded me of the couple in Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*, and there’s also something of the mood of that painting in the way I show my brother in his overalls. I was really minimal in my approach to this drawing.

On the Table shows Melvin and Vickie, my nephew and niece, Li Hong and Henry’s children. Vickie is the older child with Melvin cradled in her lap. Our family lavished all kinds of attention on them because they were the first two grandchildren.

Leslie, my late sister, is the subject of the drawing *Les*. She was a glamorous teenager in those days and ran for Cottonball Queen in Chinatown, a community fundraising event. The Cottonball Queen was chosen through sales of raffle tickets; whichever candidate sold the most tickets was declared the winner. I helped Les sell forty books of tickets and she won. Les always pleased our parents, but when she was sixteen she rebelled and started smoking. My mother chased her around the house screaming at her, but Les continued to smoke—I show her smoking in the drawing. She died five or six years ago, and, although she had quit smoking, we think the years of cigarettes impacted her lungs.

I selected the image of *Les, Bill and Vickie* from the same photo from which I took Nell’s image. Leslie nurtured and took care of us, and our nieces and nephews were always attached to her.

Let's move on to the next series, the T'ian'anmen Series. These seven ink paintings on paper came out of your intense reactions to the massacre in Beijing. What was the process which led you from the television to your studio?

At the time of Tiananmen, I had been working with the Triton Museum and the Asian Heritage Council on a Chinese American exhibition which would travel to Shanghai. As part of the exhibition, together with the fact that my family and I wanted to make a "roots" trip, I had planned to travel to China in July. The visit was emotionally loaded as Ed, my husband, still owns a family house in his father's village, and we were also going to see my father's home which is now a barn.

I was riveted to the television in June of 1989 when, following Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to the People's Republic of China, the Chinese students erupted in mourning for Hu Yao Bang, a leader responsive to their concerns for reform. They demanded democracy under the current regime of Deng Xiaoping. When the first contingent of soldiers didn't attack the protestors, I was optimistic and hopeful. That feeling changed quickly when the second military contingent obeyed orders to kill. I went into a deep depression. I could not believe that the country my father taught me to love would kill its own people. I wrote a poem called "My Father Taught Me to Love China," and in it I talk about this sense of betrayal.

For three days I went to bed and just pulled the blanket over my head; I was numb, aching, crying. The entire series erupted spontaneously. I was shocked that I chose the controlled medium of Chinese brushes with ink, yet my results were coming out with so much abandon.

I used colors in a Chinese way. Red usually means good luck, but in these pieces red evoked blood. The yellow and gold represented the Chinese soul; turquoise and aqua symbolized Deng Xiaoping and his leaders. The black stood for tragedy. The colors flowed on the paper as I used various techniques to fill the surface. Holding the brushes rigidly in the style I was taught in Chinese school, I brushed the ink directly on the paper, squirted color from a dropper of an ink bottle and tilted the paper to veil the hues as they ran. With my breath, I blew the colors to push them along. I was blowing life into the people who were killed.

During the time that I worked so intensely on this series, I painted shapes which I realized, only after the fact, looked like volcanos—some near eruption and some already erupting. When I started *Square Gone Haywire*, I saw it as a square which had lost its geometric shape because the blood was blurring the boundaries. Pretty soon an image of the soul of China emerged—opening up with the blood flowing to the sky.

When I created *Blood People: Sticking the Neck Out*, I was still painting in fury. The blood was filling up the whole of Tiananmen Square. Again the shape of the soul of China forced its way up; I viewed that as a manifestation of the brave people sticking their necks out.

In *Say*, which is the Chinese ideogram for death, I commemorated those who died. The top of the painting depicts the Beijing sky on June the fourth: the sun shining and birds flying around in the blue sky. The red

specks represent the blood of the people. At first, I painted the background stark white because it is the color of mourning for China, but then I glazed over this white with multi-colors to symbolize the chaos within.

Mock Ser Loong is Chinese for “ink-painted dragon.” I brushed bold strokes of red to evoke blood and the Chinese ribbon dance. Eventually, the body of a dragon with fringes took shape and soon a weeping eye appeared. Prehistoric figures from the caves of Lascaux and Altamira surfaced. In my search for a title for this painting, I wrote my first bilingual poem (Cantonese and English) to go with this series.

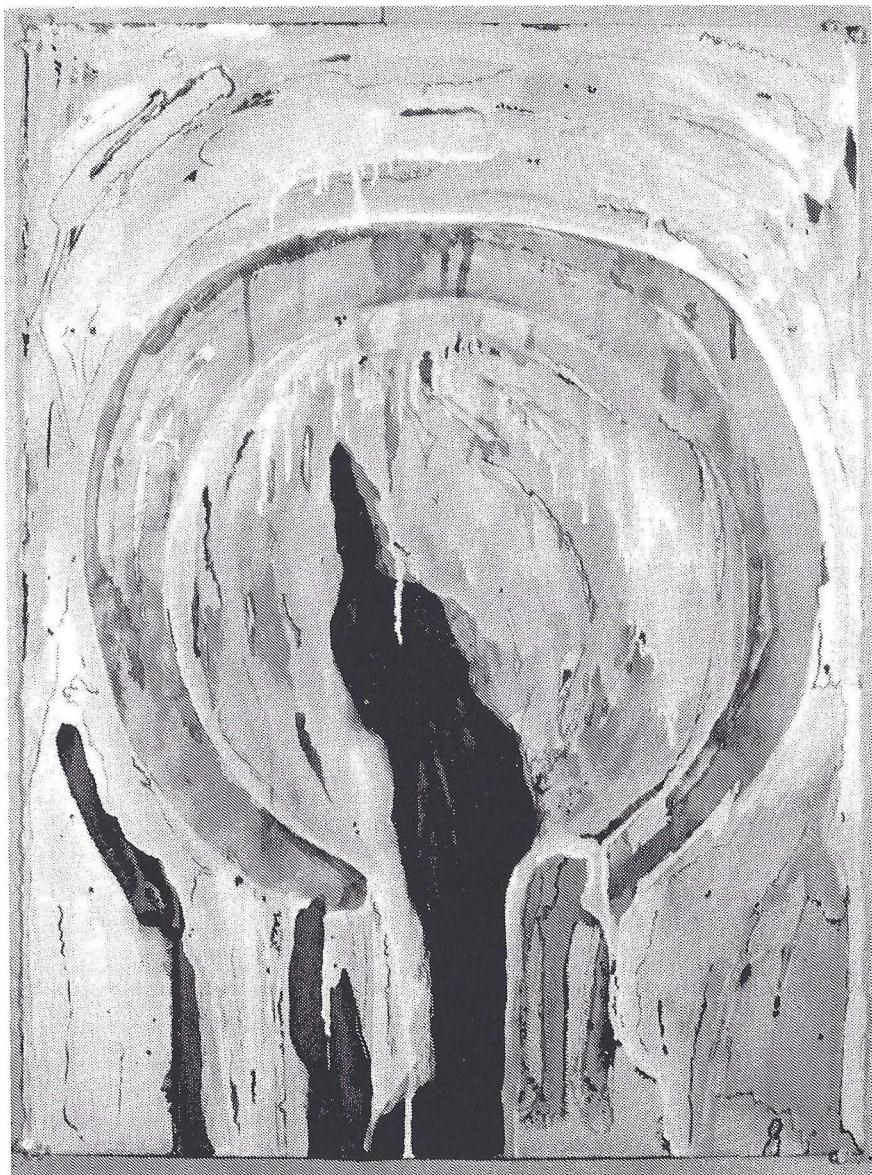
In *Moon*, which is my largest work, I used the Chinese calligraphy for door or gate. (Tiananmen means “the gate to heavenly happiness, the gate to heavenly peace.”) When one looks through the crescent shape and the strong vertical and horizontal strokes, you see the abstracted image of the Goddess of Freedom and Democracy and the soul of China.

How long did it take you to do this series?

About a month.

Why in the T'ian'anmen Series did you work in an abstract rather than representational mode?

The violence was so abstract in the way we saw the tragedy on television and in the newspapers. The protestors in China were a wave of dancers to me; I kept seeing windy rhythms, waves of ocean. It was too heinous to paint a Chinese person with blood actually spilling out the gut. I couldn't bring myself to repeat the media images.



From Indonesia They Came, 1991
41 1/4" x 33 1/4"
ink painting on paper
from the *Circle Series*
Photo by Curtis Fukuda

You began the Circle Series of some 13 ink paintings after you had started recovering from the emotional wounding over Tiananmen, and the exhaustion from your work as project director on "Completing the Circle: Six Artists." The title of this exhibition and the series are similar. Is there a connection?

Yes. The exhibition influenced the creation of the *Circle Series*. One day, I spoke to Steven J. Pon, a participating artist in "Completing the Circle," and he asked me, "Flo, why are you doing this?" My answer was, "because we are worth it." And so that first painting, *Because We're Worth It*, (which does not appear in the Mills exhibition) refers to this exchange. This started me employing the circle as a symbol to explore the Chinese meanings of it: going home, finding out who we are through introspection, one's roots and connections with ancestors.

Walking the Path combines my explorations of the Chinese meanings of the circle with what I have learnt about forgiveness through my studies of the Cherokee *tsalagi* philosophy.

How did you come across this?

I read a book by Dhyani Ywahoo who is a Cherokee teacher. I know she is a controversial figure within some Native American communities, but for me she presents a new way of looking at things. She advocates a spiritual connection between nature and people.

Hooray! Roger is Alive! lent a very different, more personal tone to the symbolism of the circle. My brother-in-law, Roger, had received a negative medical report and we thought it was a terminal illness. It turned out, however, that he was going to live. I ran to the studio and did this painting which looks like a Fourth of July celebration.

Heart Core refers to the celebration of my heart as I was learning to love again. I liked the broad strokes of the circle, and the thin lines inside it.

Child of Mine is the first horizontal painting in the series. It came out of my thinking about my responsibilities as a parent, questioning what I was doing with my children and wondering what I had given them in terms of values. The painting is addressed to my daughter.

Gender Asunder refers to my emotions—I was very angry—over the Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill hearings. I had already experienced sitting by the television and watching events during the Tiananmen massacre, and now I didn't want to just sit by the television again. Instead I went to the studio with my radio and listened to the hearings while I painted.

From Indonesia They Came is a response to my meeting a group of remarkable Indonesian women artists who were in this country as part of the Festival of Indonesia. They visited me at my Sunnyvale studio and brought energy and sparkle to it.

Parallel Dualities is a later painting in the series. It has a vertical format and I use a lot of whites, pinks, magentas and turquoises, unusual colors for me. After I had painted the circle, I glazed white over some of it. Some colors remained vibrant, while others appeared to be pushed back. I loved this push/pull with color—I'm influenced by Hans Hofmann in that way.

Why did you title the exhibition at Mills "Kaleidoscope"?

Sometimes, I think of my images as being in constant flux—spinning, twisting and tumbling around as if in a kaleidoscope. That movement is life itself.



Seow Hong and Suey Ting Gee, 1940s
(Father and Mother)
Photographer unknown

IT'S IN THE BLOOD

Nellie Wong

*We never asked to be mysterious.
We never asked to be inscrutable.
Still untold stories, untold histories.
Still the unknown unknown.
Retrieve burnt letters, receipts, bills,
anything written, anything spoken?
Our dreams in bones and ashes?
To be seen and heard.
To be known but not merely by our many names.
Being presumptuous I speak for myself.
Others who remain silent own their own tongues.*

Li Hong's ma ma died when Li Hong was an infant.
Ma said that Li Hong's ma ma was a little crazy.
The villagers said so. Li Hong likes to eat chicken feet.
Li Hong smiles, a childwoman.
Li Hong loves babies.
Li Hong is my sister.

Li Keng remembers Angel Island, the bright lights
of Oakland and San Francisco.
She said that Bah Bah sent fruit and candy
to cheer them up behind bars.
They were lucky, imprisoned
on Angel Island only four days.
The other immigrants waved goodbye,
some etched poems into the walls.
Li Keng learned to eat cheese and tomatoes
on the President Hoover.
To this day Li Keng cannot stomach butter or milk.
Li Keng is my sister.

Lai Wah remembers the ship. She was three years old.
The immigration officer asked her: What is your name?
Lai Wah answered: If you don't tell me yours,
I won't tell you mine.

Lai Wah smiled behind straight bangs.
Lai Wah remembers nothing of her years in China.
Lai Wah is my sister.

Seow Hong Gee is my father.
Suey Ting Gee is my mother.

From 1933 to 1965 Suey Ting Gee was known as Theo Quee Gee,
a sister's name, a sister's paper that Bah Bah bought
to bring his wife and daughters over.

Theo Quee Gee was supposed to be my father's sister,
my sister's aunt.

This was 1933. In 1924 the law said that Chinese men
could bring no wives to the United States.

Theo Quee Gee was unmarried but we knew better.

Nellie Wong is my name. I was never Nellie Gee
but we knew better.

When my sister's aunt, that is, Theo Quee Gee, my mother,
got pregnant, to bear a child out of wedlock
was out of the question.

So Theo Quee Gee got married, by faking
a marriage certificate, by marrying a man
named Sheng Wong who agreed to appear
on paper to be my father.

Shame to the outside world avoided.

Secrets depending on which side of the fence.

When I was five and entered Chinese school,
Lai Oy became my Chinese name.

Leslie Wong was born after me.
Ai yah, another girl! That was my mother's wail.
Ma and Bah Bah named Leslie Li Ying.
Her nick name was *tlom gawk ngon*,
three-corner eye.
Leslie Wong is my sister.

Florence Wong was born after Leslie.
Ai yah, another girl! That was my mother's wail.
So no more Li's, so no more daughters
with Chinese names beginning with Li,
beginning with beautiful.
So Florence was named Ling Oy to change my mother's luck.
Florence Wong is my sister.

William Wong was born after Florence.
Finally a boy! That was Ma's and Bah Bah's joy.
Thankful their daughter, Ling Oy,
brought them their son.
Bah Bah gave a month-old party
to shave William's head.
Eggs were dyed red, friends and relatives filled the house.
We drank chicken whiskey, gnawed vinegar pigs' feet.
Ling Oy was the magic that Ma and Bah Bah decided.
To beget (a son), to beget (a son) to love
and the heavens answered.
Wah Keung is William Wong's Chinese name.
William Wong is my brother.

I was never sure who I really was.
My school records showed that I was Nellie Wong,
that my father and Leslie's father
and Florence's father and William's father
was a man named Sheng Wong.
We told no lies, only the truth
as we were forced to.

My three older sisters were supposed to be my cousins.
My father was supposed to be my uncle.
My mother was supposed to be my father's sister.
When Theo Quee Gee confessed her illegal status,
she became Suey Ting Gee, my father's legal wife.
But it was too late. Bah Bah died in 1961.

Now I use the name, Nellie Wong.
Now I search for all the names that gave me life.

(Reprinted with permission by the author from *The Death of Long Steam Lady*, West End Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1986.)

Great China Restaurant, The Back Booth, 1947

Left to right: Melvin, Flo, Nellie, Vickie, Leslie, Bill

Photo by Henry Lew



A PLACE FOR OAKLAND CHINATOWN AT LAST?

William Wong

"Chinatown, my Chinatown..."

It would strain poetic license for me to claim proprietary interest in Oakland's Chinatown simply because I was born there, saw it almost die, and now watch with amazement at its renaissance.

Some people still don't know Oakland has a Chinatown. Others consider it second-rate, like Oakland itself, because *dai fow* (Cantonese for "big city," meaning San Francisco) casts such a long shadow.

In my reality, Oakland's Chinatown has always been a cozy place quite different from San Francisco Chinatown's tourist glitz. My parents, both immigrants from China, ran a restaurant on Webster Street between Seventh and Eighth streets, and my six sisters and I worked there for the 17-year life of the "Great China Restaurant," the immodest name of our modest cafe that served better American food than it did Chinese food.

The "Great China" was one of dozens of family-run Chinatown businesses during the 1940s and '50s. The Louie family competed with us directly, right next door. The Toms ran a produce store. So did the Jungs. The Fongs had a restaurant across the street. The Gees still operate a snack shop, Man Sang Wo, at Eighth and Webster, Oakland Chinatown's epicenter.

Dr. Jacob Yee treated almost everyone, and our favorite barber was a wisp of a woman whom we call *Fong Git Moo*, or Mrs. Fong. Her barbershop is now a popular Burmese-Chinese restaurant.

They sold live chickens across from our restaurant, and the neighborhood herb shops dispensed all manner of roots and herbs, which when boiled up into a thick acrid brew was supposed to cure whatever ailed you. Just the thought of the bitter elixir sometimes cured me.

Behind unmarked doors, elders carried on activities usually out of sight—but not earshot—of the kids. The clack of *mah jong* or *pai gow* tiles was like the neighborhood's Muzak, and we looked with awe at the gentlemen sporting three-piece suits, gold watch chains, and shiny shoes—the bosses of Chinatown's lucrative (and illegal) numbers game.

We kids were close knit, going to Lincoln School, then to Chinese School immediately afterwards. At first, we spoke a Cantonese dialect at home, but English soon became our dominant tongue. At Lincoln Square, we learned the intricacies and intimacies of an American kid's adolescent rites of passage: baseball, basketball, football and teenage dances (complete with corsages, dance cards and romantic themes), and other sweet and delicious pastimes.

On Halloween, we trick-or-treated at neighborhood stores. Some of us attended Christian churches and went caroling at Christmas time. The carolers' reward: steamy bowls of won-ton soup and soulful plates of chow mein.

During Chinese New Year, the neighborhood pulsated with Chinese opera music, firecrackers and the happy chatter of solicitous kids being handed bright red envelopes stuffed with money.

We never gave much thought to life after Chinatown. White, black or Hispanic (Mexican, in those days) people all came to Chinatown for food, but we Chinatown kids thought Chinatown was the world.

When they built the Nimitz Freeway and Laney College, ripping up scads of housing in the process, and when businesses abandoned downtown Oakland, they sucked air out of Chinatown. The Chinatown kids, now older and socialized into thoroughly American ways, rode the wind currents into other parts of Oakland or the burgeoning suburbs.

Descendants of a few of the old-time families still run some businesses, or hold substantial financial stakes, but Chinatown's renaissance has been sparked by Chinese immigrants and refugees who have arrived over the past 15 years and social activists who rallied around an ailing Chinatown.

Like so many others, I fled Chinatown, but it's as if an umbilical cord still links me to it. Though I now live a couple of miles away, I make regular pilgrimages with my wife and son.

When I was young, Chinatown kids rarely crossed 10th Street. When we did, it was for something special, like a movie at the T&D Theatre (raunchily known as the "tough and dirty") or way uptown to the Fox Oakland or the Paramount for a double-bill matinee all for a quarter. That was like passing into a foreign country.

Today, I sit in The Tribune office building at 13th and Franklin streets and marvel at how far I've come in crossing over the mythical border separating Chinatown from the rest of the world.

Yet it seems I've hardly moved. I see Chinese and other Asian businesses beginning to surround The Tribune Tower, and I sense that this new lifeblood will give our struggling little town some reason to hope that we can someday escape the shadow of *dai fow* and find our own place in the sun.

(This article originally appeared on August 28, 1988 in the *Oakland Tribune*, Oakland, California. Reprinted with the permission of the *Oakland Tribune*.)



Flo and Bill, 1946
Photographer unknown

MY FAMILY STILL CELEBRATES CHINESE NEW YEAR

William Wong

On Saturday, my family will come to my home for dinner to welcome in the Chinese New Year.

While we gather, thousands of people will jam into San Francisco's teeming Chinatown, 10 miles away across the Bay, to celebrate—in their fashion—the Chinese New Year. Most of the people there will not be ethnic Chinese.

They will be drawn by the "colorful" sights, the 150-foot long dragon bobbing and weaving to the thunderous drumbeat and crackling explosions of firecrackers, the military drill teams, the St. Mary's Chinese drum-and-bugle corps—and the chance to sample "authentic Chinese" cuisine and culture.

Started in the 1950s, the San Francisco Chinese New Year parade has attained commercial Nirvana—hyped by the city's Convention & Visitors' Bureau, listed in *Sunset* and *New West*. It is the convergence of the mutual interests of the merchant princes of Chinatown and the merchant princes of downtown San Francisco.

Without taking a survey, I dare say that most Chinese-Americans avoid the Chinese New Year parade in San Francisco. Instead, we come together in private celebrations.

I prefer what my family has done ever since I can remember—family get-togethers, plenty of food, lots of noise and good feelings. When I was younger, these

weren't precisely "reunions" because we were always together anyway in Oakland's Chinatown. My parents ran a restaurant on Webster Street between 7th and 8th Streets, and we seven children worked variously as waitresses and waiter, cashiers, glass washers and general roustabouts.

Nostalgia causes me to reflect warmly on those Chinese New Years spent in Oakland's Chinatown. For one thing, there were a lot of parties, a lot of gaiety. Chinese opera music blared from the second-story family association meeting rooms. The distinctive clack of mah-jong tiles was like the heartbeat of the community.

For another, it was a profitable time for kids. It's customary for elders to give children money wrapped in red envelopes—a symbol of good luck. There were plenty of elders around us in those days, so we made what seemed to us a lot of money—\$50.

Chinese boys, carrying brown grocery sacks, full of firecrackers, cherry bombs and assorted other minor explosives, hawked their wares openly to outsiders who came into Chinatown in droves. When police officers approached, the boys deftly hid their bags inside car fenders. Occasionally, when we all got feisty, we'd have firecrackers wars, tossing missiles across hastily erected barricades on Webster Street.

As in the practice today, a lion-dance troupe visited each business establishment in Chinatown. The shops and restaurants offered money tied to lettuce leaves. This offering was usually hung by a string, and businessmen would tease the lion by lowering, then lifting the string as the animal danced to the double roar of firecrackers and drums.

Times change. We move along. Our restaurant closed in 1961 when my father died, forcing my mother into retirement. My sisters married; some moved away from Oakland to the burgeoning Bay Area suburbs. Still, at Chinese New Year, my mother insisted that we all get together—more of a reunion this time. She was our catalyst. Her strength kept us together.

Her death in 1973 temporarily brought her children closer together. I became host of our Chinese New Year celebrations. Since my mother's death, however, I've often wondered why we still get together—my sisters and I, our spouses and children.

Our lives have taken divergent paths—some of us live in cities, others in the suburbs. We are secretaries, teachers, homemakers, engineers, mechanics, entrepreneurs. Our politics span the spectrum. Our racial and sexual consciousness ranges from the active to the sublime.

Like other families, we've had joyous events (births, marriages) as well as sad ones (divorce, death, rape). Some of us—all of us—ask from time to time: Are we special? Or are we like any other family? This kind of collective introspection becomes obsessive at times.

Our parents may have done too good a job, selling us on the idea of remaining a unified family, of having unspoken obligations to one another, of never dishonoring each other.

As an ideal, my sisters and I generally agree that family unity is meritorious. But in light of our changing lives—rooted in the simple phenomenon of getting older and complex phenomenon of being an ethnic minority in America—we wonder whether that ideal can be attained.

Life was so much simpler for us in Oakland's Chinatown. Our restaurant was our community; when it was sold, we lost our common experience. With my mother's death, we lost our catalyst.

Sometimes I think: So what if we are family; I don't share interests with some of my sisters or brothers-in-law. They don't know me; I don't know them. If we can't be friends, why get together, even at Chinese New Year, our most joyous of times.

We now number more than 30. Our parties are noisy. We try our best to catch up with each other's lives; it rarely works. The hectic atmosphere isn't conducive to rational, serious discourse. It is not the time to learn how each feels about a serious issue, personal or otherwise; what our perceptions are; how we've changed—or haven't changed.

The loud chatter is sometimes inane; occasionally, we try to outshout one another. Sometimes we seem strangers in search of a long-lost friend. We practice the form of a family gathering, but there is no substance.

At other times, I think: Maybe the substance is the form, that family is enough. It would be nice if we were friends too, but because we're family, that's reason enough to get together.

If past gatherings are any guide, this will be the scene Saturday night at my home: The cousins—my nieces and nephews—who don't see much of each other anymore, will congregate in one corner, exchanging tidbits about their lives. The men will bask in the reflected glory of the Raiders. The women will examine each other's gold and jade jewelry, half in admiration, half in envy. Inevitably, there will be poker and mah-jong games.

One custom I still observe is kowtowing (bowing) and burning incense in honor of my parents' memory. After my father died, my mother had me burn incense for him. It was the male's duty, she indicated. Then one recent year, I thought I would be the only one burning incense. Instead, all my sisters and some of their children stood in line to do the same. We were creating new customs.

The smoke from the incense choked us. Meanwhile, a sister in the kitchen was cooking a Sichuan hot pepper beef dish. The chili peppers sizzling in the hot oil made the kitchen crew choke even more, watering our eyes, almost gagging us. But it was a delicious dish.

(This article originally appeared on February 19, 1981 in the *Oakland Tribune*, Oakland, California and is reprinted with the permission of the *Oakland Tribune*.)

FLO OY WONG: A NARRATIVE CHRONOLOGY

Moira Roth and Diane Tani

Based on a series of video interviews by Beth Beasley, Fernanda Lai, Amy Westphal, Cathleen Williams and Moira Roth (Fall 1990), and audio interviews by Diane Tani and Moira Roth (August 1992), together with quotations from Wong's writings. These include "There's More to Being Chinese in America than Chop Suey: Narrative Drawings as Criticism in Oakland Chinatown" (*Pluralistic Approaches to Art Criticism*, edited by Kristin G. Congdon and Doug Bandy, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1992) and short unpublished essays and notes on her various series.

October 28, 1938

Gee Ling Oy (Florence Wong) is born at 333 Seventh Street in Oakland to Seow Hong Gee and Suey Ting Gee, immigrants of peasant background from Canton, China. She is the sixth of seven children, and has five sisters (Li Hong, Li Keng, Lai Wah, Nellie and Leslie) and one brother (William) who is the youngest child.

The first wife of Wong's father had died in China after he had already emigrated to America. "Needing someone to care for his aged mother and his young daughter, he married my mother through a traditionally arranged marriage. As a 'picture bride' she cared for her mother-in-law and stepdaughter in my father's village while he stayed in America. Each time he visited her in China, a child was conceived." During this period, there were highly restrictive U.S. immigration laws which forbade wives in China to join their husbands in America. "In 1933 my father was able to purchase false immigration



Family portrait, c. 1944

Left to right: Nellie, Li Keng, Suey Ting (Mother), Li Hong, Bill (seated),
Henry Lew (brother-in-law), Seow Hong (Father), Lai Wah, Flo, and Les

Photographer unknown

papers for his wife, so she entered as my father's sister, marrying in name only a man called Sheng Wong. I grew up as *hoo gee nuey*, a false paper girl, with the prevalent fear of disclosure and eventual deportation, afraid that my citizenship would be rescinded.

"I was named Betsy by the doctor who delivered me. But my older sister, Li Keng, didn't like the name. She liked Florence and suggested that to my mother, so I became known as Florence. My mother decided to name me Ling Oy because she had given all the other daughters the middle Chinese character of Li which means "beautiful." My mother was increasingly under pressure to bear a son and so when I was born, she wailed and beat her breast, and said, "I'll change my luck and call this daughter Ling Oy, and that means to 'get love.' She will bring a son."

1939

Seow Hong Gee (Wong's father) is wounded by a cousin in a shooting at 725 Harrison Street. Five decades later, the incident became a source for *Eye of the Rice: Yu Mai Gee Fon*. (See discussion in Roth's essay in this catalogue.)

1939-1945

Period of World War II. "My mother sewed parachutes for the soldiers. My father and oldest sister worked in a naval shipyard. At the time, our Japanese friends were taken away and interned in wartime relocation camps. After searching for ways to support the seven of us, my parents opened the Great China Restaurant in 1943. From then on, Great China becomes our window to the world."



Flo, 1954
Photo by Ed Wong

1943-1961

Family plays an important role in Oakland's Chinatown of the 1940s through the 1960s. "My dad was the family's mentor for community leadership and participation. For the longest time he was a member of the Suey Sing Association and he contributed to it. He helped organize festivals, which were Chinese operas, and for these we would close off Webster Street and put up a stage. I explained these festivities to our non-Asian customers who were intrigued.

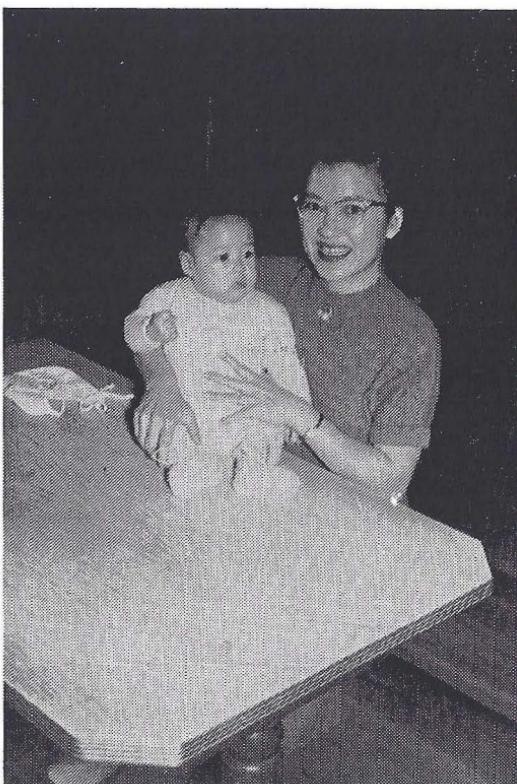
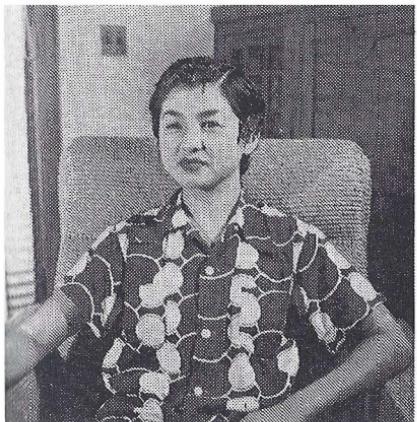
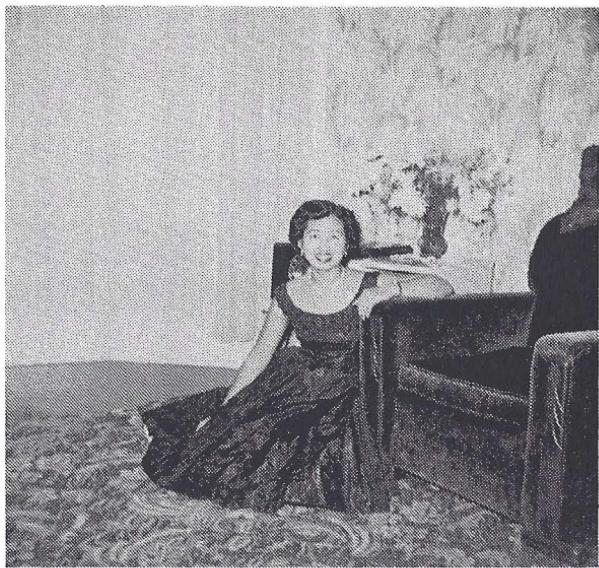
"Our home life centered on the restaurant where we cohered as family—eating, studying, working. Our nuclear family stretched to include other Chinatown merchants and their families, the lonely pensioners who lived in the nearby Salvation Army hotel, the indigents who came in from the cold. We lived a block away in a rented Victorian house in a neighborhood of working class people and merchants. There was no time to play because our family was always under pressure to succeed. I did manage to sneak out once in a while to ride a bike or to play 'milk carton' baseball, but I always returned to do something at Great China. Living in Chinatown, I thought everyone was like us—striving, working, struggling.

"My whole family has had an ability to write and to draw, but we didn't see it in my parents because they never had a chance to do these things. My brother Bill dreamed of becoming an architect. As a child, he would sit in the restaurant and draw—I still remember a beautiful horse he did. Nellie loved the cinema and wanted to be a dancer. She fantasized about Joan Crawford and Dana Andrews. At school, I was fascinated



Top: Li Hong, 1950s
Bottom: Nellie & Bill,
1950s





Top: Lai Wah, 1950s
Middle: Les, 1950s
Bottom: Li Keng
with her
son, Kirby, 1950s

by three classmates who always drew—Daniel Sinyork, Janet Lee and Reiko Kuritsubo. Their drawings were magical; I copied them and started making my own Christmas cards at an early age. I was in awe of my sister Lai Wah's talent. She painted posters at Technical High for school events and planned an art career. I remember a Carmen Miranda poster she did for a dance, loving the flourishes of the outfit. The blouse and skirt were so expressive. Years later, when both of us moved to the South Bay, we took Chinese painting lessons together. Even now, Li Keng, who is retired from a teaching career, is writing her autobiography."

1952-1956

Attends Oakland High School located outside Chinatown. For the first time mixes with non-Asians beyond elementary school and the restaurant. "When I first started Oakland High, I was thrown head-on into a non-Asian environment. It helped that my sisters, Nellie and Leslie, were already there. What a culture shock to be outside of Chinatown. I became acutely aware of the diversity of people."

1956-1960

Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. In 1960 receives B.A. in English. "I always thought that I would be teaching Shakespeare to high school students. I never gave art a thought, although I did like my decorative arts class which was designed for teacher training."

1961

Receives California teaching credential, California State University, Hayward.

Marries Ed Wong on July 2nd. (Ed, a native of Augusta, Georgia, had moved to Oakland as a teenager with his family to open a neighborhood grocery store in West Oakland.) Following their wedding, the Wongs move to Palo Alto, where Ed is a doctoral student in the electrical engineering department at Stanford University.

Great China Restaurant is closed.

Father, Seow Hong Gee, dies on August 18.

1961-1966

Teaches full-time at Colonial Acres School in San Lorenzo and Carmel School in Los Altos. Stops teaching to raise family.

1962-1966

The Wongs travel to the East Coast of the United States—Boston, New York, Washington D.C.—and to Mexico City, Oaxaca and Acapulco.

1963

Settles in Sunnyvale.

1966

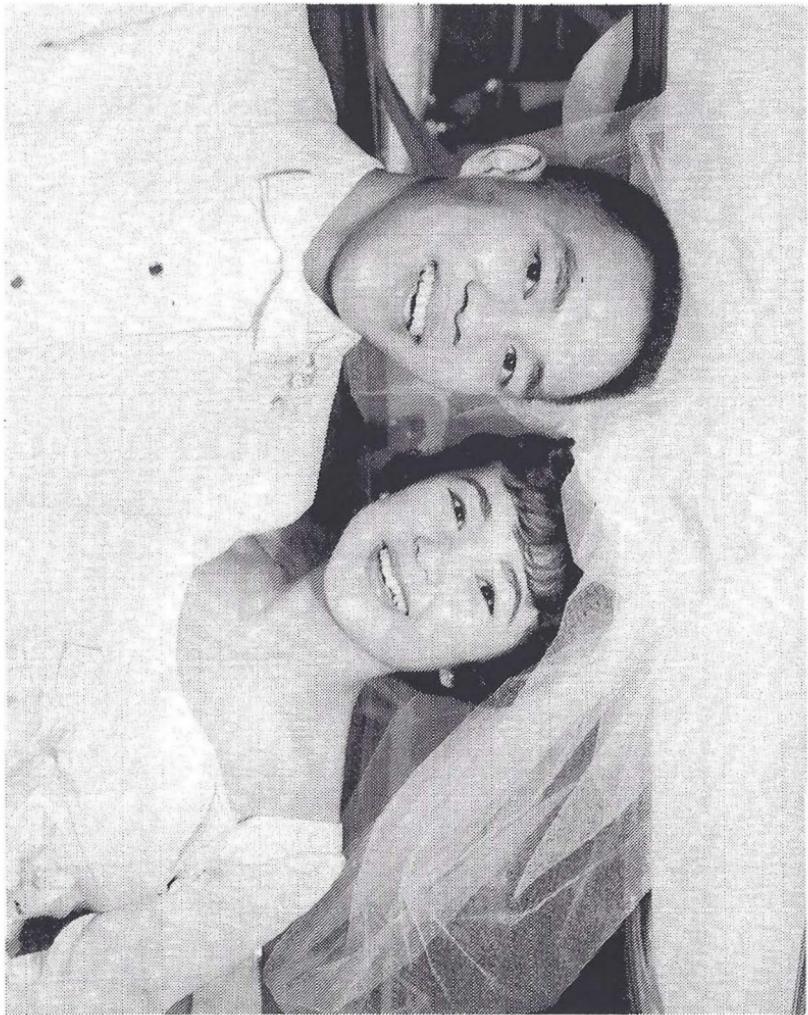
Birth of Felicia Joy Wong.

1968

Birth of Bradley Jon Wong.

Flo and Ed's Wedding, 1961

Photo by Jesse Gill



1970s

Takes adult education classes in poetry, painting and serigraphy. Teaches art and creativity at Sunnyvale Community Center. Offers Chinese cooking and serigraphy classes at the Mid-Peninsula YWCA, where she is also a volunteer on the Ways and Means Committee. Among her responsibilities is fundraising. Contributes and prints silkscreen designs for yearly YWCA calendars. Establishes silkscreen T-shirt cottage industry with two women partners. When the partners quit for personal reasons, Wong carries on alone. Sells products at King's Mountain Art Fair.

1973

Mother, Suey Ting Gee, dies on October 16.

1976-1982

Returns to college to study art, first at DeAnza College, Cupertino (1976-1980) and then Foothill College, Los Altos Hills (1976-82). "In 1976 when I returned to college as a fine arts student, it was the time of Judy Chicago. I was strongly influenced by her work and the art of Käthe Kollwitz and Georgia O'Keeffe. When Chicago's 'Dinner Party' was shown in San Francisco, I found it so energizing that I visited the exhibition twice, once with my children along. In my classes, I initially created formal assignments using charcoal, conté, colored pencils, inks and pastels. I also took serigraphy and etching. It was in these classes that I initiated exploration with visual issues based on my heritage.

"In an art history survey class, I consulted with the instructor, telling him that I specifically wanted to use Asian images in my work. 'That's not necessary,' he replied. 'The fact that you are Asian American makes

the art you create Asian American.' I wasn't able to tell him how I disagreed, how I hungered to stretch beyond the Western-influenced symbols I was using, how my creativity needed to be satisfied in an ethnic-specific way. For an etching class final, I traced a Chinese mythological image from a book and submitted the design for approval to my instructor. He discovered the tracing and refused to accept it. Intimidated, I retreated from using a personalized heritage-based symbol, and used instead Native American images which were 'safer' for me than self-reflecting Chinese American imagery.

"Later, when I did regain courage in my serigraphy class to explore Chinese imagery, I created a print to evoke the Cantonese expression for "worry," *kwa sum*, which literally means "hang heart." The teacher said that my print was too simplistic. Despite that critique, my need for heritage-based and gender-based expressions never subsided. This intense focus resulted in several student projects: including a Chinese New Year painting installation and an autobiographical installation incorporating a wok, wooden crates, braided string, 7-Up bottle caps and rubber bands. For another assignment I soldered a figurative sculpture based on my body, using knotted rubber bands to create the hair.

"Eventually, a group of fellow art students—Adele Aced, Daphne Rush and Mia Valentine—and I left to form the Green Wagon, a women's art collective. We met weekly on a rotating basis at each of our homes, drawing from nude models. At the same time, by myself, I started the pastel *Floral Series*, visual metaphors of my siblings and me. I was also coping with the pain of several deaths within the family, and it was then that the works of Käthe Kollwitz, Edvard Munch and Vincent

Van Gogh challenged me to probe deeper beyond my floral pieces. I created many self-portraits in pastels and did drawings of my children, sometimes from photographs and sometimes when they were asleep. Often times, Felicia modeled for me."

1977

Graphite drawing by Wong of her daughter, Felicia, is selected by her sister Nellie for an illustration in her book, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park*. "When Nellie asked Lai Wah and me to contribute drawings for her soon-to-be published book, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park*, I celebrated not just because she asked for an art work of mine, but, because she was finally getting a chance to share her poetic talent beyond the family. The manuscript represented her dogged literary pursuit through the years which had started with an adult poetry evening class. She previously wrote family Christmas newsletters, formatting them with clever words and phrases. I read them, suggesting that she develop her talents and find newer audiences to appreciate her creativity."

1978

Wong is significantly influenced by an exhibition by Lee Tacang, a Pilipino artist. "He was the only instructor of color I had at the local junior college. For an exhibition, he stacked rice sacks along with cords of wood and other elements of his farm labor youth. When I first viewed the exhibit, I didn't like what I saw because I thought all sculpture was derived from the classical European models. I could not identify with the source of his inspiration. However, he began to explain about his childhood, and the use of rice sacks in the Philippines. I listened, and my resistance to his work melted as I

understood his origins, his core. An admiration for his courage developed. His use of Chinese rice sacks then triggered the importance of rice as a symbol in my life as a first generation Chinese American contemporary artist." After this encounter, Wong begins her *Rice Sack Series*. Her first piece is machine-stitched with colorful thread and sewn with dried Chinese mushrooms and 7-Up bottle caps. Enters it for a DeAnza College student exhibition, but it is not accepted for display. The juror's comment is, "Not as well thought out as it could be."

1981

Starts cultural and visual art-focused tour of England, Scotland, Germany and Italy with family.

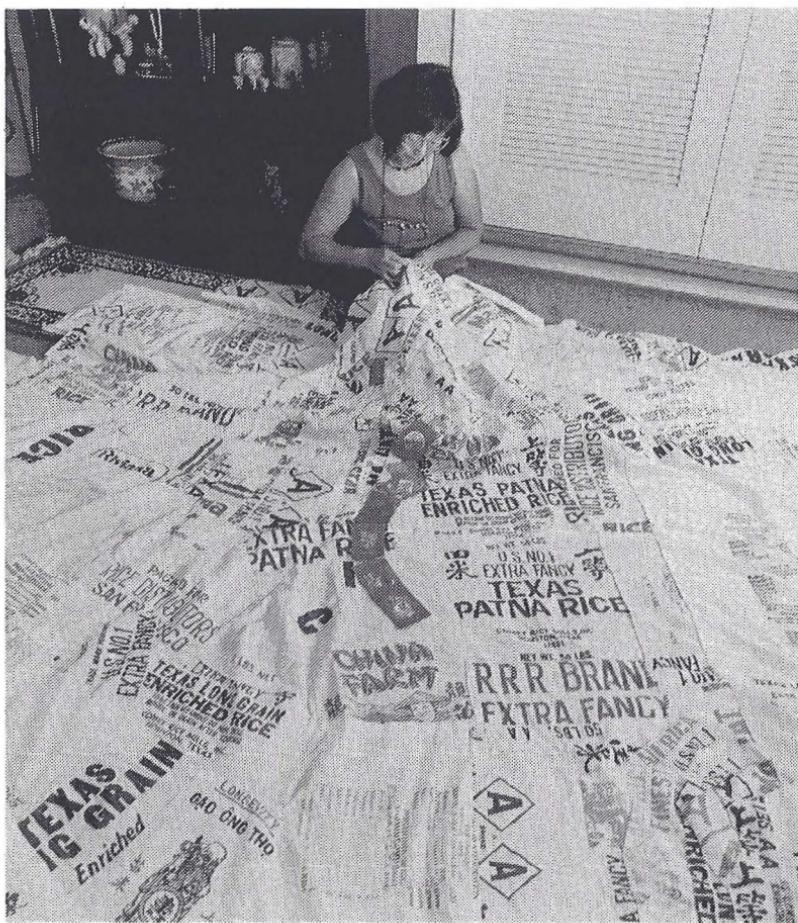
Breaks ankle in home accident. Creates *Ankle Convalescent Series*, pencil drawings of plants given to her during recovery time. Draws in bed while immobilized, wearing an ankle to hip cast for one and a half months.

1982

Returns to teaching art at various elementary schools in the area of Mountain View and Sunnyvale, and occasionally in Oakland's inner city schools and the Museum of Children's Art. She is a founding member of the Sunnyvale Arts Commission, helping to originate the city's public art policies. Exhibits in first group show with members of the Green Wagon, Creative Art Center Gallery, Sunnyvale.

1983

Begins *Oakland Chinatown Series*. (See interview with Wong in this catalogue.) Increasingly active politically, becomes a Board Member of Asian Americans for Community Involvement, Santa Clara County. In a 1990



Artist at work on *Eye of the Rice*, 1987
Sunnyvale, California
Photo by Curtis Fukuda

video interview with Nellie Wong, the poet comments, "I think of Flo as a fighter. Her nickname was 'Guy Na Oy' which reflects the feistiness of a hen running around. It's a nickname she had for a long time because of her personality and how she expressed herself. Flo can't just paint and draw. She has to be active. She has always been like that—the way I've seen her getting involved with what's going on in the city of Sunnyvale or supporting her son, Bradley, when he was protesting racism in his high school. She has always liked to get her hands in stuff. She's not the kind of person to sit still. She definitely sees the injustice, social injustice, that we have in our society."

1984

Begins on-going relationship with the Asian Heritage Council in Santa Clara County, a Pan-Asian American organization. "I joined the Asian Heritage Council, looking for an organization that supported and promoted Asian American arts. It aided me in my vision to showcase contemporary Asian American visual arts in South Bay art spaces. In 1985 May Chung, the founder of Asian Heritage Council, and I presented a proposal for a contemporary visual art exhibition to Bill Atkins, Triton Museum Director, which was realized in the exhibition titled 'Contemporary Voices: The Asian American Aesthetic.'"

1985

Has first solo exhibition "723 Webster Street," Asian Resource Gallery, Oakland. Shows approximately 17 drawings from *Oakland Chinatown Series*. "Two years after I started the series, I had produced a small body of work.

I took courage and brought my drawings to the Asian Resource Center in Oakland Chinatown to show them to the gallery director. I said, 'Would you be interested in displaying these? Do you think I have something here?' The answer was, 'Yes.'"

Beginning the same year, in order to acquire first-hand information for teaching, Wong and her husband, Ed, embark upon a series of journeys to various art sites. They visit Lascaux in France, and Altamira in Spain; in 1987, Kenya and Tanzania in Africa, France's Loire Valley and the Burgundy coast; in 1989, the Galapagos, Macchu Pichu in Peru and Ecuador; in 1991, Portugal and Spain; in 1992, Pakistan, their introduction to Asia. A planned family-roots trip to the People's Republic of China is aborted in 1989 because of the June 4th Tiananmen massacre.

1986

Appears in *Profiles in Excellence*, a Stanford Area Chinese Club (SACC) publication authored by historian Connie Young Yu. The book presents notable Chinese Americans in the South Bay who have made significant contributions in various fields.

Begins the first experiment of *Eye of the Rice*, a small triangular piece composed of rice sack fragments. "I started *Eye of the Rice*, an on-going, large, mixed media textile piece following an inspirational visit to sculptor Ruth Asawa's home, where I saw her crocheted wire sculptures. I thought, if she could crochet wire, then I could stitch rice sacks. So, the project, seeded in my art



Brad and Felicia, 1988
Photo by Flo Wong

student days, began again. Hand-sewing that first stitch with purple thread on a white sack was a revelation. Since 1986, I have worked on *Eye of the Rice* while still drawing and painting other bodies of art."

1987

George Rivera and Wong work to present "Contemporary Voices: The Asian American Aesthetic," Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara; and several *Oakland Chinatown Series* drawings are displayed in this exhibition. Through the exhibition, meets Betty Kano and other contemporary Asian American artists.

1987-1988

Writes a column "South Bay FloW," for *East/West*, a San Francisco Chinatown community newspaper. "One of my articles was used in a successful effort to keep open a Mountain View Chinese supermarket which was slated to shut down because of disputes with neighboring businesses and the city itself." Interviews the first high school exchange students in Los Gatos, CA, from the People's Republic of China.

1989

Begins negotiations, on behalf of Asian Heritage Council and the Triton Museum, with representatives of the People's Republic of China to send a contemporary Chinese American visual art exhibition to their country which will later be titled "Completing the Circle: Six Artists." Initially included in the proposal to Shanghai, she drops out to become the exhibition's project director and fundraiser. This exhibition, its catalogue, extensive panels and publicity consume a large portion of Wong's energy over a year and a half.

In February, attends Women's Caucus for Art (WCA) annual meeting, San Francisco; takes on the task of gathering slides of Asian American women artists for the WCA. She contacts Kano, and together they expand the project so that in March, they found the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA) located in northern California. Over the next three years, organizes exhibitions and slide presentations by group members. (In Spring 1990, slide show is expanded to include Asian American male artists for a San Francisco Art Institute's symposium, "Sources of a Distinct Majority.") "AAWAA is an organization that connects us as Asian American women artists. We come together in friendship to share, to grow professionally and to help one another. Since our founding, we have added another chapter to American art history through exhibition, documentation and, most important, through visibility."

1989-1990

In 1989 appointed project director for the 1990 Asian Heritage Council, "Completing the Circle: Six Artists." This landmark exhibition consists of works by Bernice Bing, Hilda Chen, Steven J. Pon, Hilda Shum, Michael Tang and Mimi Chen Ting, all Northern California Chinese American artists. The exhibition is shown in 1990 at Southern Exposure Gallery in San Francisco, and is part of San Francisco's Festival 2000, a multicultural festival of art, music, dance and theater. As Wong writes in the exhibition's catalogue, originally the show was conceived "as a people-to-people cultural exchange between the People's Republic of China and the United

States. Designed as a traveling exhibition to the city of Shanghai, the exhibit was canceled as a result of the June 4th events in Beijing." A bilingual, English/Chinese catalogue accompanies the exhibition. "We did that so that we could access a lot of Chinese language-based people who are non-English speaking. We wanted to let them know that art was a part of their lives as well as ours." At one of the several panels which accompanied the exhibition, Wong comments: "What I like about the exhibition is that it shows that Asians and Asian Americans have soul. We have plenty of it. It's just that it's been so strange for us to address the fact that we have soul, that we are embarrassed when talking about it."

1989

Early in the year creates first rice sack "artchair" entitled *Lee See Star Mai Aung* which is shown in "3 Universes in the Atomic Cafe" exhibition, I. D. E. A. Gallery, Sacramento. *Lee See Star Mai Aung* is a well-worn chair with patches from rice sacks and stitched sequins and *lee see* (the traditional red bag which contains money given to young children for the Chinese New Year) on the ribboned-and-rice-sacked arms and back.

On June 4th Tiananmen Square massacre occurs in Beijing, China. Wong is devastated. "I cried so hard. I was mourning, mourning more than just the physical death, mourning the concept of freedom that was not allowed to flower. I spoke to my manager and I told him what I was doing, and how in despair I was. He said, 'Get out of bed. Go to the studio and make your statement there.' Following his advice, I started the first painting



Flo and Ed, 1992
Fourth R: Art Award
DeAnza College
Cupertino, California
Photographer unknown

of the *T'ian'anmen Series*, crying on paper for the brave students who led the uprising, the workers who supported them, the everyday citizens of Beijing who offered food to the soldiers, the courageous soldiers who disobeyed. I started to paint and I knew that I would do a hybridization of styles in that I was using a traditional Chinese brush, yet also Western inks from Germany." Creates the *T'ian'anmen Series* and writes poetry about these events in Beijing. (See interview with Wong and Roth's essay in this catalogue.)

1990

Begins *Bitter Melon Rice Blues*, a second rice sack chair made from her son's discarded college beach lounge, rice sacks, sequins, discarded lace curtains and miniature Chinese opera masks.

"Completing the Circle: Six Artists" is installed at Southern Exposure Gallery.

Starts *Visibility Series*. "As a non-white growing up in America, I constantly dealt with the issue of visibility/invisibility. Feeling marginal my entire life, I began to visually articulate my feelings about being an American female of Asian descent. Using Chinese brushes in the manner I was taught in Chinese school, I painted abstract works to cope with the traditional concept of femaleness within my Chinese heritage. I also explored my feelings of being physically present, but not being seen, in the wider framework of American society."

In the 1990 Mills College videotape on Wong, she states: "I want to be remembered as an artist who was willing to take responsibility for telling my own story. Also, I'm not comfortable with the earlier media and literary portrayals of Asians, specifically of Chinese people. Recently, we have contemporary people from our community who have told 'more true' stories of us. I like that."

1991

In January is included in "Her Story: Narrative Art by Contemporary California Artists," Oakland Museum; and also part of a six-person traveling exhibition, "Our History, Our Rituals," organized by Salad Bar, a local artist-activist group.

Has solo show, "Long Grain, Extra Fancy," at 1078 Gallery, Chico.

Continuing to paint with ink and Chinese brushes, Wong creates the *Circle Series*. (See interview with Wong in this catalogue.) She travels to New York to moderate a Women's Caucus for Art panel, "Fighting for Survival in Feminism: the Asian American Experience," and is appointed to the National Board of Directors of the WCA. Wong begins to play an influential role in the organization's national politics and decisions. "At first, I declined an invitation to join the WCA National Board. It was only after I visited the Smithsonian Museum during the 1991 Asian Pacific Heritage Month and found that we were invisibly represented, that I agreed to serve on the board and, possibly, to act as a conduit on behalf of a segment of our art community, to create visibility for us as Asian American artists."

1992

Among her activities, Wong makes a presentation in the Regional Conference of the Asian American Studies of the Pacific Coast (ASPAC), San Jose State University; and conceptualizes and moderates panel, "Education in Cultural Context: Who Takes Responsibility?" for a Northern California Women's Caucus for Art conference at Mills College. Receives the Fourth R: Art Award from DeAnza College's Euphrat Gallery for her sustained efforts to educate children and youth in the visual arts. "Children are our future. I want them to connect to themselves through non-verbal ways. That is possible through 'hands-on' visual arts and a balanced knowledge of art history."

In April, Wong's essay, "There's More to Being Chinese than Chop Suey: Narrative Drawings as Criticism in Oakland Chinatown," is published in an anthology, *Pluralistic Approaches to Art Criticism*.

In May, is included in a two-person exhibition, "deFORMATION/transFORMATION," at Capp Street Project/AVT with Hilda Shum. Exhibits *Eye of the Rice: Yu Mai Gee Fon*. (See discussion in Roth's essay in this catalogue.) "The installation is composed of a cloth collage and other elements including a small book. Displayed on the wall were hand-sewn, sequined, rice-filled sacks, pinned with peach fertility medallions. I gave the book to viewers along with a package of *lee see* containing loose white rice and sequins to represent the philosophy of *mmm haong siew*, a Cantonese saying which literally means 'no empty hand,' in other words, a return to others for what they give to you."

In June, is included in a group exhibition, "Food for Thought," Berkeley Art Center Association. Inspired by artist Mel Chin's Capp Street installation titled "Gallery," which dealt with the psychological aspects of Asian Americans as victims of hate crimes in America, she creates an installation, *Bitter Melon Rice Blues: Elegy for America*, out of Chinese joss paper, rice sacks, candles and the *Bitter Melon chair*. Expressing the Chinese concept of *Ching Ming* (Bright Clear or New Day), a springtime cemetery ritual to honor the dead, the installation is dedicated to the memory of Vincent Chin and other Asian Americans who have died over the past ten years because of anti-Asian violence. Viewers are asked to place a flower on a symbolic tombstone to pay their respects to these victims.

In September, has one-person exhibition, "Kaleidoscope," Prieto Gallery, Mills College.

LIST OF WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

OAKLAND CHINATOWN SERIES (1983-)

Standing on Webster Street

1983, 20 3/4" x 16 1/4"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

Washing Dishes: Lo Wong Bok

1983, 20 1/4" x 16 1/8"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

Mom, Pop & Me

1984, 19 1/4" x 15 1/2"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

Bill in the Back Booth

1984, 20 1/4" x 17 1/2"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

Wiping the Table

1984, 18 1/2" x 15"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of Felicia Joy Wong

Sitting in the Back Booth

1985, 17 3/8" x 20 1/8"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

Great China: The Front Counter

1985, 17 1/2" x 20 1/4"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of Bradley Jon Wong

Nell at 13

1985, 20 1/4" x 17 1/2"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

The Back Booth

1985, 16 3/4" x 19 1/4"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of William Wong

On The Table

1985, 17 3/8" x 20 1/4"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

Les

1985, 17 1/2" x 19 5/8"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

Les, Bill & Vickie

1987, 20" x 17 1/2"

graphite drawing on paper

Collection of the artist

T'IAN'ANMEN SERIES
(1989)

Square Gone Haywire
39 1/2" x 50 1/4"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Blood People: Sticking the Neck Out
39 1/2" x 52 1/2"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Say
53" x 34"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Mock Ser Loong
45 5/8" x 66 1/4"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Moon
62 1/2" x 52"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

CIRCLE SERIES (1991)

Hooray! Roger is Alive!

41 3/4" x 33 3/8"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Walking the Path

41 7/8" x 33 3/8"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Heart Core

41 7/8" x 33 3/8"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Child of Mine

33 3/8" x 41 7/8"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Gender Asunder

41 1/4" x 33 1/4"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

From Indonesia They Came

41 1/4" x 33 1/4"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

Parallel Dualities

33 1/4" x 41 1/4"

ink painting with Chinese brush on paper
Collection of the artist

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

LUCY R. LIPPARD, a writer and activist, is the author of innumerable articles and 14 books including the most recent, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in Multicultural America* (1990). Co-founder of *Heresies* and contributing editor to *Art in America*, she lives in New York City, Georgetown, Maine and Boulder, Colorado.

HUNG LIU, an Oakland-based artist who teaches at Mills College, left China in 1984. She has exhibited widely including a 1992 one-person exhibition at the Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York. Recently she completed a major installation at the George R. Moscone Convention Center, San Francisco.

MOIRA ROTH, writer and activist, is the author of many articles and editor of *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America* (1983) and *Connecting Conversations: Interviews with 28 Bay Area Women Artists* (1988). She is the Trefethen Professor of Art History, Mills College, Oakland.

DIANE TANI, photographer and activist, is a member of the Board of Directors at SF Camerawork, San Francisco and recipient of a 1991 Eureka Fellowship from the Fleishhacker Foundation. She is a contributing photographer to the Women's Work Project, funded and supported by Liz Claiborne, Inc.

NELLIE WONG, poet-activist, is the author of two collections of poetry, *Dreams in Harrison Railroad Park* and *The Death of Long Steam Lady*. She is co-featured in the documentary film, "Mitsuye and Nellie, Asian American Poets."

WILLIAM WONG is associate editor and columnist of the *Oakland Tribune*. He also writes a column for Asian Week. He has won numerous awards and frequently speaks on community issues.



**Antonio Prieto Gallery
Mills College**

Visibility Press